

CITY OF HOUSTON



PLANNING COMMISSION GENERAL PLAN SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT DECEMBER 14, 2006

GENERAL PLAN FOR THE CITY OF HOUSTON

Preface

The General Plan for Houston is intended to be comprised of a series work plans to resolve specific issues of widespread interest to its citizens and business sector. The City Council charge to the Planning Commission was to define the priorities and propose work plans to address them.

Our committee's capacity to perform this task over the defined six month period was significantly enhanced by the prior work of Blueprint Houston and other entities in our community. Blueprint Houston had recently completed an effort to determine a Citizens' Agenda for Houston's Future in May 2003. This agenda was utilized in conjunction with the committee's views of the City to develop the priority list for submittal to the Planning Commission and City Council. The review of this agenda also caused the committee to understand the issues that were currently under consideration by others and therefore, did not need a competing or redundant effort.

The recommendations of the committee are to develop work plans for mobility and drainage as the highest priorities for the City. These two plans would address, in whole or partly, several of the Citizens' agenda goals-public transportation, air quality, infrastructure, roads and congestion, and flood management. Other work plans may be defined in the future which could address other agenda items, and progress is currently being made on items such as economic development, water quality, and more stringent restrictions on construction in the floodplain.

The Mobility and Drainage Plans should be coordinated as these systems are inter-related. More specifically, deep ponding of water in street rights-of-way due to inadequate drainage systems inhibits mobility. The work on these two plans and their implementation should continue to be coordinated over time (as should the efforts of other entities) to promote the effective use of resources and the consistency of the problem solving relative to the goals of the community.

The Mobility and Drainage Plans will also directly impact the growth of the city's tax base as new and redevelopment is likely to occur in areas where infrastructure upgrades are in place.

Introduction

The work of this committee was propagated by an action of the Houston City Council during its annual budgeting process on June 21, 2006. The General Plan committee was charged as follows:

“That City Council instruct the Planning Commission to proceed with a planning process that would include identification of priorities and specific plans and a work plan that would lead to a general plan and with a set of priorities so that they could proceed to develop a Houston style plan that can be adopted by this body at the earliest reasonable time.”

This charge is differentiated from the development of a Comprehensive Plan in that the Planning Commission was directed to identify priorities and to develop work plans for consideration by Council as opposed to the traditional comprehensive planning process which focuses on values and goals definitions and then conceptualizes direction and action plans.

This committee reviewed the previous values efforts prepared for Houston as well as the values development for other similar cities (Kansas City, Dallas and San Diego) and found that the values were similar in each planning effort. The constancy of the values reflects that people in urban areas in the United States have similar interests and concerns about their lives and communities. In recognition of these similarities, the General Plan committee assumed that the previous efforts to define the values of Houstonians are still valid.

The committee's focus then was to define specific issues that have significant impact on the City's future potential for inclusion in the General Plan. The topics of consideration reflect the impressions of the committee members as well as the commentary heard at the regular City Planning Commission meetings regarding the citizens' concerns about new or redevelopment. Comparisons of these issues to previous work by Blueprint Houston and its predecessor organizations were also made with Blueprint Houston's Citizen Conference attendees identifying 10 priority issues¹. Houston-Galveston Area Council, along with other organizations, sponsored a series of visioning meetings that named three key regional guiding growth values². Priorities specified by the Planning Commission in this report are consistent with those named by participants in these two initiatives.

The General Plan committee is comprised of public sector, private sector, and not-for-profit interests including three members of the Planning Commission. Representatives of interested groups such as Blueprint Houston also attended many of the committee meetings.

Background

The City's development was largely contained within the IH610 loop until 1960 and was funded with private sector investment to construct relatively small deed restricted neighborhoods with commercial and industrial development interspersed. There were also areas of industrial concentration such as along the Ship Channel.

Since 1960, the City has expanded geographically in a significant way promoted by development of single-family residential subdivisions using public financing through the utility district vehicle. The City's annexation policies provided for expansion of the city limits and the City's service obligations. As the individual utility districts matured and became more fully developed, the City would annex the districts based on a financial

¹ http://www.blueprintheouston.org/BH_Reports.php4. (May 31, 2003). A Citizen's Agenda for Houston Future.

² HGAC. (Summer 2006). Envision + Houston Region. (Sponsored by Blueprint Houston, North Houston Association, ULI Houston, AIA, Center for Houston's Future.

analysis of revenues within the districts and remaining debt to be retired. The City would then assume responsibility for public safety, solid waste, public health, and infrastructure maintenance and replacement while the district's facilities were still relatively new. This annexation policy expanded the City to its current size of over 600 square miles of which nearly 75 percent is developed.

After the Kingwood annexation in 1996, the State of Texas modified the City's annexation capacity by requiring the development of a three-year implementation plan with identified funding prior to the City announcing its intent to annex. The State also approved the use of limited purpose annexations by the City as sales tax generators in the extra-territorial jurisdiction (ETJ) of the City. The City has coupled the limited purpose annexations with agreements to not annex districts in the ETJ for extended periods of time.

It is important for the City to continue increasing its property tax base through new development of heretofore undeveloped land within the city limits or through redevelopment of existing developed property to spread its costs over larger tax base and to increase its efficiency in the provision of public services. The redevelopment can range from the conversion of urban brownfields to newer uses or the piecemeal replacement of single-family cottages with townhouse, patio home, and other denser clusters of residential development.

The City is now experiencing an unprecedented level of redevelopment and densification particularly in the older parts of the City, which often are not subject to deed restrictions. These areas often have infrastructure that is fifty years or older, potentially beyond its useful life, and potentially, undersized for the increased demands of redevelopment. Growth predictions generally anticipate adding three and a half million people to the eight-county region by the year 2035. Harris County is expected to grow by two million people in that period.

The City Council also recently passed an amendment to Chapter 19 of the City of Houston Code of Ordinances which addresses construction within the flood plain. More stringent criteria were adopted which can further reduce the amount of developable land in the City. These new restrictions affect both new and redevelopment in the flood plain area.

The densification of the City has prompted questioning about the capacity of the drainage and flood control systems, the loss of impervious cover and tree canopy, the capacity and layout of the public street systems, and the capacity to fund the improvements needed to serve the increased demands.

These factors have led the City Council to request the Planning Commission to identify the priority items for establishment of work plans to facilitate orderly new and redevelopment of the City.

Note that the sum of the individual items proposed for consideration may in aggregate comprise many of the elements of a general plan. It is necessary for the City's leadership to regularly question the effectiveness of the plans and their successes/failures, to reassess the base conditions and needs of the future, and to modify the plans as needed. However, it is also important to recognize the need for predictability in the adoption and enforcement of regulations by the City so that long term development programs do not constantly have to adapt to new or changing criteria.

Priority Items for Consideration

The charge from City Council requested that priorities be established in the pursuit of a General Plan for Houston. The determination of priorities does not indicate that other issues are lacking in importance, but that they are not at the highest level of concern as expressed through matters presented to the Planning Commission or via recent visioning activities. Through the committee discussions, it became apparent that three issues dominated the interests of the public who speak at the regular Planning Commission

meetings. These three issues relate to neighborhood preservation, mobility, and drainage. The neighborhood preservation issue is currently being addressed by a separate committee of the Planning Commission. The development of successful programs to address the other two issues will have the secondary impact of addressing other concerns of the community, such as improved air quality due to congestion relief.

The focus on mobility and drainage recognizes that without solutions to these problems, the new and redevelopment of Houston and the region will be dramatically inhibited. As the population grows in the region, we can expect that the development of suburban single-family residential communities will continue to provide housing for families who make the trade off of a longer commute for lifestyle and school system benefits. However, many current and new residents of the area are choosing to live closer to the urban core or nearer to mature centers of commercial and retail activity which will provide for dispersion of town centers throughout the region over time.

Mobility and drainage plans with solutions can be viewed as critical drivers to promote new and redevelopment. As the densification of the City occurs, public safety interests will react and provide the services required by the changing urban environment. Other issues discussed by the committee such as neighborhood preservation, housing, parks/recreation/ beautification, and governance in the region are being aggressively pursued through other efforts. For instance, the City is contracting for a Parks Master Plan update which should reflect the needs of a more densely populated urban environment and the interests of the City in providing more park and recreational space in neighborhoods.

Work plans for mobility and drainage have been developed by the Public Works Department and reviewed by the General Plan committee for consideration by Council. These work plans are included in the appendix. A summary of the proposed plans follows:

Mobility Plan: This plan should coordinate efforts of the local agencies charged with the development, design, and construction of transportation systems. The City has direct responsibility for the surface street and bikeway systems including the major thoroughfare, collector, and local street systems. The City needs to regularly assess the effectiveness of its major thoroughfare system to be the cross-town carriers of traffic loads independent of the highway systems, as well as the feeders and dispersers of traffic to and from the highways, transit corridors, and tollroads. One of the few tools that the City has to ensure mobility in the region is the major thoroughfare plan, and we should maintain its integrity as a mobility planning vehicle.

On a localized level, the Mobility Plan needs to address the connectivity of streets within individual subdivisions to the adjacent existing or new developments. The Planning Commission needs guiding principles from this plan because many neighborhoods desire insulation from adjacent areas which is in competition with a connected mobility system. The connectivity of streets can often become politicized, and the Planning Commission would benefit from a Mobility Plan endorsed by Council for future implementation.

The Mobility plan should reflect the efforts of Metro in its fixed corridor systems and in its bus routing. The Harris County Toll Road Authority, Harris County, and the Texas Department of Transportation planning and funding efforts should also be coordinated in this plan. The Houston-Galveston Area Council has generated mobility plans for the Year 2025 and is now working on a Year 2035 update, which the City should actively engage in. HGAC is promoting increased connectivity of the street and mobility systems as should the City plan.

Drainage Plan: The city's drainage system is composed of inlets, storm sewers, open ditches, driveway culverts, detention storage, and sheet flow (typically in the public street right-of-way). These systems discharge to the open channel system which is primarily the responsibility of the Harris County Flood Control District. In 1984, the Harris County Flood Control District adopted new regulations that required the street systems in new subdivisions to allow for sheet flow to cascade to the receiving channels with a

maximum allowable storage depth of water at the low points of the paving design. These new regulations also required studies of receiving channels to determine their capacity to accommodate the change in flows due to development and required detention storage to offset the impacts of the development (for smaller tracts, an impact fee was charged in lieu of small detention facilities with the intent to offset the impacts of the smaller developments with regional detention facilities or improvements in channel conveyance).

Street systems constructed before 1984 may have included sheet flow design, but the many areas of deep street ponding across the city indicates that these designs were not in widespread use or were not coordinated due to a patchwork development history. The densification of development in the City increases the demand for mobility at all times and excessive street ponding (even if structures are not flooding) may not be acceptable. The goal of the Drainage Plan would be to reduce the depth of ponding in the street rights-of-way throughout the City to an acceptable standard which would allow for a restricted level of mobility during intense rainfall events. The reduction in storage depth may be achieved through the construction of storm sewer improvements, new detention storage, street reconstruction, or creation of new sheet flow outlets to alleviate deep ponding in certain areas. The solutions for each problem area should reflect the conditions that create the problem; there is not a “one answer fits all” effective solution.

Program Funding: The funding of the development of the mobility and drainage plans is a small component of the overall commitment required to actually resolve the mobility and drainage issues in the City. While new guidelines and regulations can be adopted to address future impacts, they will not resolve the existing problems. Therefore, it will be incumbent on the City Council and administration to develop and support funding mechanisms to ensure long term predictable resources to solve these problems. The dedication of resources will allow the City to define a programmatic approach to the Capital Improvements Plan with measurable results and scheduled commitments to perform.

Planning Commission Action

A discussion of the proposed recommendations of the committee was conducted by the Planning Commission at a meeting on November 30, 2006. The General Plan committee met on December 12, 2006, and gave its consent for presentation of its recommendations to the Planning Commission at its meeting on December 14, 2006.

APPENDIX

Mobility Preliminary Scoping Document/Workplan

Guiding Principles (subject to discussion)

- Mobility is a key factor in community's vitality
- Costs associated with new development/redevelopment must be equitably allocated
- Access (curb cuts/medians) must be consistently and pro-actively managed
- Right-of-way standards for future major arteries must reflect "best practices", fully recognize aesthetic concerns, and anticipate peak traffic volumes at fully developed conditions.
- Neighborhood concerns must be carefully balanced with need to maintain circulation (recognize value of connectivity/circulation)
- Long-term "notice" provided by Major Thoroughfare Plan must be effectively publicized and communicated
- Non-structural approaches should be considered as well as new road construction

Issues/Approaches

- Study area definition (ETJ or beyond?? Role of surrounded cities?)
- Build on major thoroughfare plan (enough differentiation? adequate widths/ROWs? Technical basis?)
- Interface with other agencies (TxDOT, Harris Co., METRO)
- Access management principles/standards*
- Development of basis for traffic impact fees*/application of proceeds
- Interface/coordinate with HGAC RTP
- Balance concerns about neighborhood preservation with mobility needs
- Contraflow opportunities
- Traffic control system coordination*
- Role of toll/managed lanes in planned future projects
- Integration of pedestrian and bicycle uses

*Items already in development within PWE/Traffic and Transportation Division

Planning Level Estimate

- Anticipated one-year effort
- \$1.5 to 2 million as base, depending on scope and details

Drainage Preliminary Scoping Document/Workplan

Guiding Principles (subject to discussion)

- Primary objective is protection of property
- Development impacts must be carefully considered and managed
- Regional approaches preferred to “site by site” or “lot by lot” approaches
- Recognize inter-relationship between street planning and drainage planning
- Critical emergency services depend on mobility/accessibility during wet weather
- Costs associated with new development/redevelopment must be equitably allocated
- Dedicated source of consistent local long-term funding for drainage improvements is needed

Issues/Approaches

- Interface with Ongoing multi-agency study led by Flood Control District (City is significant participant) (2 yr/\$2.5 million effort...)
Goals:
 - o increase understanding of flooding/drainage issues
 - o improve stormwater management throughout watershed
 - o develop “better” public projects
 - o improve public understanding/confidence
- Consensus on design approach and basis
- Coordination of efforts across multiple agencies
- Development controls and standards
- Utilize knowledge base (LIDAR)
- Move beyond narrow view of “adequacy” of storm sewer system per criteria
- Assume full development
- (at least) initial focus on “older” (pre-1984) developed areas
- Consider “pilot” area of inside loop/redeveloping area to identify design basis and approximate cost of improvements, then extrapolate for initial City estimate.
- Develop framework for long-term funding approach, with goal of implementing funding plan in Fall 2007

Planning Level Estimate

- Initial six-month effort, with examination of “pilot” area
- Planning level estimate \$2 million depending on scope and details

